

Peter Dunlap-Shohl, *My Degeneration. A Journey Through Parkinson's*

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My Degeneration. A Journey Through Parkinson's
Peter Dunlap-Shohl
Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2015
106 pages, 6.8 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches, 97 color ill.
ISBN: 978-0-271-07102-2 (paperback)

Contemporary life writing is imbued with sick, disabled and suffering bodies and minds. It is a fast expanding popular and hybrid subgenre, which has found its place within the creative industry, self-help culture and therapeutic discourse. More recently, it has spawned its own vocabulary: life writings about illness and impairment are often labeled as (auto-)pathographies or as (auto-)somatographies. As a strongly visual dimension remains inherent to society's understanding and conceptualization of illness, disability and diagnosis (see Garland-Thomson 2002), it is unsurprising that the medial approaches of the graphic memoir, comic and graphic autosomatography have proven exceptionally effective in their creative representation. A continuously growing appreciation for such comics as a significant and accessible medium for communicating these issues is first of all apparent in the diverse public of readers. These include, among others, patients, teachers, caregivers, doctors and scholars. Additionally, we may trace specific institutional evolutions. Since several years, there has been an annual international comics and medicine conference and, more recently, Penn State University Press has launched a publication series, called Graphic Medicine (eds. S.M. Squier and I. Williams). The Graphic Medicine series adopts a diverse approach in its aim to publish comic studies from scholars, practitioners and medical educators, as well as comics used in medical training and education, and self-reflexive graphic somatographies or memoirs. The third publication in the ongoing series is such a self-reflexive graphic somatography: *My Degeneration. A Journey Through Parkinson's* by Peter Dunlap-Shohl, former editorial cartoonist for the Anchorage Daily News

My Degeneration goes back thirteen years in time to the moment when the main character, Peter, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at the young age of 43. At first, he felt as if his world collapsed: "[it] is to have a meteor strike your world, transforming it into smoking ash." (6) In the following eight chapters, however, a dynamic, fast and sometimes humorous narrative unfolds: without knowing for how long he would be able to enjoy the privilege of tying his own shoes, to hold a pencil or to shake his head yes or no, Peter tries to come to terms with his "progressive, disabling, incurable" (6) disease. He guides the reader through his diagnosis blues, his depressions and fears of constantly worsening symptoms, he talks about his creative experiments with therapy and medication, his coping mechanisms and the impact of the illness on his family ties. The main focus clearly lies on how illness pervasively disturbs daily life and on the struggle to accept the illness. This overarching plot structure is also made visible by a map that outlines his journey: the map leads one from the "mountains of denial" to the "vale of rage" which needs to be bridged. Then, the path leads towards the "plain of despair", beyond which one enters the "forest of confusion." Finally, the trail ends at the "sea of acceptance". (67) This straightforward narrative, like many illness narratives, is framed

as an adventure story. Peter is the main character, though the story convincingly interweaves his personal experiences and courageous journey with medical facts, information about the Parkinson's community and care guidelines.

Dunlap-Shohl's comic suggests the act of gathering information about one's diagnosis and illness as absolutely vital. Peter not only obsessively researches Parkinson's disease, he also shares all kinds of petty details about the illness with his wife, friends and sometimes directly with the reader. This adds a highly pedagogical and almost instructive dimension to the story. For instance, the second chapter "Learning to speak Parkinson's" is completely dedicated to the technical vocabulary of the illness. Here, Peter playfully presents the dictionary *English-Parkinson's*, *Parkinson's-English* and elaborates terms which are "unfortunately useful" (18) to describe symptoms, emotions and behavior typical for Parkinson's disease patients: "festination", "emotional incontinence", "logorrhea", "bradykinetic" and "postural instability". Furthermore, *My Degeneration* carefully explores the state of the art of medical knowledge about Parkinson's disease. Not only medical facts play an important role in the story, there is also close attention for the use medication and its side effects. Furthermore, Peter undergoes a high-tech deep brain surgery, which is meticulously documented. It would seem that the medical sciences are generally well represented: most medical interventions result in consolation and temper the symptoms. However, this affirmative view on the medical approach to illness is immediately nuanced by sharp criticisms of the patient-doctor relation. Through the use of absurd and harsh humor, several panels illustrate doctors' incapacity to communicate severe diagnoses in a sensitive way. There is, for instance, "the gimlet-eyed skeptic" who underestimates serious symptoms and complaints, "Dr. Doom" who declares "you will be dead before your body gets used to it" and another doctor informs his patients of their diagnosis through a burst of laughter (8-9). In one example where a doctor is trying to explain Parkinson's disease to Peter, the graphic weight is put on a big crashing piano (7). The crashing piano comes, quite literally, out of nowhere and flattens not only Peter's legs, it interrupts the dialogue between doctor and patient, it pushes the medical explanation to the background and highlights the helplessness of the doctor in the face of the patient's overwhelming emotionality.

The critical attitude towards the medical model is further nuanced by alternative and creative forms of care which take into account the perspective of friends, family and the Parkinson's community. This is illustrated, for instance, in the scene where Peter is at a busy and overcrowded airport when he has one of his "off-moments," which means he cannot move at all. With the help of his wife and son, he ultimately finds an alternative way of moving. In another example, several Parkinson's disease patients perform creative strategies to cope with and adapt themselves to such "off-moments." They show how they move differently by doing the Throwing Toes step, the Walk Pigeon-Toed, the Straddle Step, the Ragkicker's Dream, etcetera. This passage where other patients offer their tips and tricks could be interpreted as an instructive guideline that interrupts Peter's self-story. It is an illustration of how *My Degeneration* hints at the therapeutic self-help genre and how drawing other patients into the narrative emphasizes the importance of community in coping with Parkinson's disease.

In *My Degeneration* verbal and visual metaphors are also abound. The most recurrent metaphor is the traditional one of fighting-and- exceeding-a-disease. In the second last chapter, "A different path", Peter finds himself in a boxing ring fighting and throwing punches into a void – after all, "Parkinson's is marked

by absences and described in terms of what is no longer there.” (88) During this fight a remarkable change of perspective comes along: Peter realizes that a constant combat with a tireless adversary is pointless. Somewhat moralistically, he trades the fighting-the-disease metaphor for the idea of the tightrope walker: to have Parkinson’s disease, Peter concludes, is to walk on a tightrope. One needs “discipline, imagination, courage and balance.” (91) Yet, however adept the funambulist may be at his craft, he cannot manage by himself: it takes “the help of assorted co-conspirators and friends” and together we know “the only way is forward.” (91) Considering both the comic’s explicitly non-hierarchical relation between the medical model and the effectiveness of alternative coping strategies, and the significance of community in caretaking and healing, it undermines essentialist perspectives on Parkinson’s disease.

Apart from its moralistic, ‘true-to-life’ and pedagogical aspects, Dunlap-Shohl’s comic also has an appealing fantastic dimension. *My Degeneration* is populated by psychological monsters, poltergeists and green ogres. Most of them embody Parkinson’s disease. Though they are frightening, some are benevolent because they materialize the uneasily expressed aspects of the disease (e.g. olfactory degradation, apathy, hallucinations) and allow Peter to discuss his fears, worries and embarrassments. By embodying these invisible aspects, *My Degeneration* produces a shift in perspective that makes the reader more intimately familiar with Peter’s condition. In one panel, for instance, Parkinson’s disease is pictured as a three headed monster—thus a multiple personality—while a voice-over declares how “PD can change over time, too bad with all those personalities it couldn’t come up with a likeable one.” (21) Here the complex and unpredictable features of the disease are emphasized – an illness, so the monster seems to suggest, is not a stable or fixed entity. In chapter 3, “Interview with a killer”, Parkinson’s disease (PD) is a big ugly green man that knocks at Peter’s door. The two have a conversation and PD lets Peter know that he will take everything from him that cost him a lifetime to acquire, for instance: buttoning a shirt, talking, drawing, walking, smiling, etcetera (26).

Interestingly, Peter is not the only one who sees the monsters, poltergeists and ogres. His wife does as well – they will bury one of the ogres together. This of course emphasizes again the importance of the support of family members in coping with illness, but it also blends reality and fantasy. This blend of reality and fantasy clarifies that since Parkinson’s entered their lives, nothing is definite, fixed or stable anymore. Moreover, the fact that nothing is definite, fixed or stable anymore is visible in the loose gestural and expressive drawing style. At first sight, the intentional quivering lines seem above all to express Peter’s uncontrollable tremors. But the wobbly lines and figures also accentuate the instability and unpredictability that an illness introduces into someone’s life.

Peter’s emotions are further materialized by the tension between panel and page. The often varying dimensions of the panels make for a heavy, disjunctive layout and create an atmosphere of disorder. On other pages, one finds small and very thin panels, some of which are put together without any gutter. In still other cases, it seems as if the panels are too many to fit the page and bleed beyond its edges. This panel-page-game thus amplifies the bodily imbalance and quivers, and the agitation and uncertainty Parkinson’s disease forces upon one’s life: both the condition itself and the coping mechanisms are utterly overwhelming. It also contributes, however, to the quick and dynamic rhythm of the narrative, producing a sort of rush to keep going (or in this case to keep reading) – just as the tightrope walker metaphor initiated: *the only way is forward*.

Another aspect that makes *My Degeneration* fascinating is the presence of Parkinson’s disease at the level of medium. The comic was made thirteen years after Dunlap-Shohl got his diagnosis, hence at a moment

when the illness had already affected him as a cartoonist. Because of pains and bodily ailment, Dunlap-Shohl had to abandon pen and paper for digital drawing. The comic devotes several panels to this transition and shows how the restrictions and limitations of illness cause great frustration yet open up new creative opportunities at the same time. It is intriguing how the digital aspect is quite literally visible since *My Degeneration* itself is the result of Dunlap-Shohl's digital drawing practice. In short, it is inspiring how the medium of digital drawing, the style, the pictures itself and the structure of the panels amplify meaning rather than stabilizing it.

At first sight *My Degeneration* thus wants to be mainly informative and educational. In that respect, three aspects are of significance: collecting information about the particular illness, relying on the Parkinson's disease community and finding ways to adapt yourself to the new situation. Furthermore, by these three aspects as well as the structure of the story (emphasized by the map that leads one to the "sea of acceptance") the comic almost seems to suggest a normative and good practice of being a Parkinson's disease patient. However, *My Degeneration* goes beyond its instructive and informational dimension and convincingly elaborates the complexity and instability of Parkinson's disease. Because of the fantastic dimension, the specific drawing style and absurd humor the comic effectively represents multiple perspectives on being ill without imposing an essentialist synthesis.

Peter Dunlap-Shohl's also writes about Parkinson's disease in his two blogs, *Off & On The Alaska PD Rag* and *Frozen Grin*.

Works Cited

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